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# Symbolic Racism in the 1995 Louisiana Gubernatorial Election\*

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*Objective.* In this paper we explore the effects of symbolic racism on the intended vote choice of whites by examining a white-on-black statewide election. It is argued that symbolic racial attitudes will be activated in a white-on-black election simply because of the mere presence of a black candidate. *Methods.* The white prospective vote for a white racially conservative candidate is examined using survey data from the 1995 Louisiana gubernatorial runoff conducted by the University of New Orleans Survey Research Center. *Results.* Symbolic racism was a strong predictor of intended vote choice, even after controlling for partisan identifica-

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\* SOCIAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY, 81:4 (December 2000), pp. 1027-1035. Copyright © 2000 by the University of Texas Press, P.O. Box 7819, Austin, TX 78713-7819. Used by permission.

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## *Symbolic Racism in the 1995 Louisiana Gubernatorial Election*

tion and self-identified political philosophy. *Conclusions.* Racial attitudes remain an important predictor of vote choice in the South, even when racial issues are not directly raised in an election campaign. More generally, our findings point to the continuing centrality of race and racial attitudes in the South, and specifically their role in the increase in Republican voting for subpresidential contests in the 1990s.

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In his seminal work on Southern politics, V. O. Key, Jr. (1949:665), noted that "in the final analysis the peculiarities of southern white politics come from the impact of the black race." Since the mid-1960s, Key's observation has also been true of the nation. Indeed, for many observers race and racial issues have changed the structure of the party system, and shaped party identification and vote choice (Black and Black, 1987, 1992; Carmines and Stimson, 1989). At the same time, race has emerged as an important variable determining the attitudes of whites and blacks. As Kinder and Sanders note, differences between white and black policy preferences on racial issues—and some non-racial issues—"have no counterpart in studies of public opinion" (1996:27). Given the evidence that places racial attitudes and issues at the fulcrum of contemporary American politics, both within and outside of the South, a considerable literature has developed that seeks to explain why racial attitudinal differences persist when public opinion has apparently become more favorable toward the principles of racial equality (Sniderman and Piazza, 1993; Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo, 1985).

One explanation is that white attitudes and behavior remain shaped by concerns about race. However, today racial attitudes take on a form more “subtle” or “covert” than old-fashioned “biological” racism. This concept of “symbolic racism,” the term used by Sears and Kinder (1971) to explain white vote choice in the 1969 Los Angeles mayoral election, has become an important determinant of white attitudes and voting behavior more generally. The “framing” of racial issues in symbolic ways by candidates or political elites is important. As Kinder and Sanders note, symbolic racism “is not an automatic part of American political discourse or public opinion ... Its prominence is contingent, not fixed. How deeply resentment infiltrates our politics depends importantly on decisions made by political elites” (1996:258). Thus the context of a campaign, i.e., the types of candidates running and the issues that are made salient, are important in determining the significance of racial attitudes that explicate white attitudes and behavior.

Recent analyses have generally examined white-on-white elections when exploring the impact of symbolic racism on white attitudes and vote choice (Howell, 1994; Sadow, 1996; Kinder and Sanders, 1996). In this paper we follow the lead of Sears and Kinder (1971) in examining a white-on-black contest. In illustrating the importance of symbolic racism, we examine the 1995 Louisiana governor’s runoff which featured a white conservative Republican, state senator Murphy J. “Mike” Foster, and a black liberal Democrat, U.S. representative Cleo Fields. We argue that this contest was a “racially relevant election” (Sears, 1988:59) and that the mere presence of a black candidate contributed to-

ward making race a salient campaign issue and, ultimately, a decisive factor in the outcome of the election.

## **Conceptualizing and Identifying Symbolic Racism**

To the extent that race and white racial attitudes were a decisive factor in the 1995 Louisiana gubernatorial election, they were likely manifested as symbolic racism. This concept, originally articulated by Sears and Kinder (1971) and developed by Kinder and Sears (1981), posits that white racial attitudes are no longer shaped by “biological racism,” the notion that blacks are inherently inferior to whites. This “new racism” evolved as a consequence of a white backlash to an increasingly politicized black electorate following the success of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, reaching its zenith with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The responses of whites were characterized by a mixture of “some antiblack feelings with the finest and proudest of traditional American values, particularly individualism” (Sears, 1988:54). Central to the concept of symbolic racism is the idea among whites that blacks are not at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder because of in-born abilities, but as a result of not meeting the values embodied by the “Protestant work-ethic” of self-reliance, hard work, obedience, and discipline (Kinder and Sears, 1981:416).

While the concept and measurement of symbolic racism has proved controversial in terms of both its validity (Sniderman and Tetlock, 1986; Sniderman and Piazza, 1993) and whether or not it is really an expression of racism (Bullock and Campbell, 1984), it has proved to be a powerful

explanatory variable for a variety of individual-level political attitudes. Symbolic racism shapes white attitudes toward racial policies, especially busing and affirmative action programs (Kinder and Sanders, 1996:116–19), preferences on social welfare policies, issues which are not race specific but which are deemed to benefit blacks disproportionately (Kinder and Sanders, 1996:121–24; Gilens, 1995, 1996), and attitudes toward black candidates (Sears, Citrin, and Kosterman, 1987; McConahay and Hough, 1976; Sears and Kinder, 1971).

### **Symbolic Racism in the 1995 Louisiana Gubernatorial Election**

To what extent were white symbolic racial attitudes important in explaining candidate preference in the 1995 Louisiana gubernatorial election? Before this question can be answered, the case must be made that at least one candidate in the gubernatorial election, through campaign actions or statements, made race and racial attitudes salient.

Certainly the presence of black U.S. representatives Cleo Fields and William Jefferson in the election made race a salient issue without any candidate having to mention race overtly or subtly. However, with the exception of former state representative David Duke, now reduced to perennial candidate status in statewide Louisiana elections, there was no single candidate with a specific racially conservative message. This did not mean that an appeal to white racial attitudes was not pursued by the other white candidates. Interestingly, the first candidate to use race as a campaign

“issue” was Democrat Mary Landrieu. Following the surge by Cleo Fields in polls following the withdrawal, and subsequent endorsement of Fields, by William Jefferson, the Landrieu campaign put out a number of advertisements two days before the primary election, on mainly black radio stations, suggesting that Fields could not defeat Mike Foster in the runoff election. Fields responded by saying that Landrieu had played “the race card,” a charge which she denied. This caused a rift between the two candidates with Landrieu refusing to endorse Fields in the runoff election.

Race was used more subtly, and in a way consonant with the symbolic racism literature, by Fields’ runoff opponent, Mike Foster. The Foster campaign made a number of issues salient which reinforced a conservative image, especially on race. He called for a repeal of affirmative action programs, supported the plaintiffs in the *Hays v Louisiana* case that challenged the “majority-minority” congressional district of Cleo Fields, and challenged the Motor Voter law. Perhaps the best example of symbolic racism came during the runoff campaign, when Foster was discussing the problem of crime. He noted that predominantly white Jefferson Parish “is right next to the jungle in New Orleans and it has a very low crime rate” (quoted in Ott, 1995:2). This is precisely the sort of racial code word central to the new symbolic racism (Edsall and Edsall, 1992:Chap. 10). Thus, there does seem to be enough evidence that in the 1995 Louisiana gubernatorial election certain candidates succumbed (to use the phrase of Kinder and Sanders [1996:198]) to “the electoral temptations of race.”

## Data and Methods

To test the hypothesis that the symbolic racial attitudes of whites played a central role in the 1995 Louisiana gubernatorial runoff election, data were taken from a telephone survey conducted by the University of New Orleans Survey Research Center (N = 494—whites only).<sup>§</sup> Our analysis proceeds in three stages. First, the key variable “symbolic racism” is operationalized based on four items taken from the survey,<sup>\*\*</sup> and its reliability is confirmed. Second, we examine

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<sup>§</sup> 1 The survey was based on systematic random samples, one black and one white, drawn from a list of all registered voters in Louisiana. All interviews were by telephone. Full details about the survey are available on request from the authors.

<sup>\*\*</sup> 2 Wording of questions tapping symbolic racism:

Now I am going to read several statements. After each one, I would like you to tell me whether you agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly.

Receive Less: Over the last few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve. (Disagree)

Minorities Overcame Prejudice: Irish, Italians, Jewish, and other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors. (Agree)

In past studies, we have asked people why they think white people seem to get more of the good things in life in America—such as better jobs and more money—than black people do. These are some of the reasons given by both blacks and whites. Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each reason.

Try Harder: It's really just a matter of some people not trying hard enough. If blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites. (Agree)

Slavery Created Conditions: Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class. (Disagree)

the impact of symbolic racial attitudes on candidate evaluation in the 1995 gubernatorial election. Third, the impact of symbolic racism on vote choice in the runoff election is explored.

## Symbolic Racism and Vote Choice

Did symbolic racial attitudes explain white vote choice in the 1995 Louisiana gubernatorial runoff? As the dependent variable—voting for Foster or not voting for Foster—is dichotomous, logistic regression is employed. Vote choice was regressed on symbolic racism as well as on age, education, income, gender, ideology, partisanship, and five issues—government spending, government providing jobs, government providing health care, government helping minorities, and control of handguns.<sup>††</sup> Results are presented in Table 1. Symbolic racism, education, ideology, and partisanship all reached statistical significance. That symbolic racism was an important determinant of vote choice in the 1995 Louisiana gubernatorial election, even after controlling for partisanship and ideology, demonstrates its explanatory power.

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<sup>††</sup> 3 Controls for the variables measuring individualism and egalitarianism would also have been desirable. Unfortunately, such items were not asked in the survey. However, as Kinder and Sanders (1996:117–20) demonstrate, symbolic racism has been found to exert an influence on white attitudes and behavior above and beyond individualism and equality.

TABLE 1

Logistic Regression for Predicting Vote for Mike Foster in the  
1995 Louisiana Gubernatorial Election (whites only)

	<i>b</i>	<i>S.E.</i>
Symbolic racism	.99***	.19
Age	-.05	.12
Education	-.25*	.14
Income	.06	.08
Gender (male)	.27	.31
Ideology (high = Con)	.29**	.13
Partisanship (high = Rep)	.21**	.09
Government spending	.09	.10
Government provide jobs	-.03	.13
Health care	.14	.11
Help minorities	.05	.12
Control handguns	-.01	.08
Constant	-.96***	.32
Percentage correctly classified =	81.7%	
Null prediction (vote for Foster) =	79.1%	
Proportional reduction in error =	12.4%	
Model chi-square =	77.93 (df 12, p < .001)	
Goodness of fit =	350.42 (df 358, p = .603)	

NOTES: The dependent variable is coded 1 for Foster, 0 for Fields.

\*p ≤ .10; \*\*p ≤ .05; \*\*\*p ≤ .01.

As logistic regression is a nonlinear procedure, the logit coefficients themselves are not easily interpretable. However, by using the logit equation, it is possible to derive the impact of independent variables on the probability of voting for Mike Foster. Only the variables which achieved statistical significance in Table 1 are used for predicting probabilities. Predicted probabilities for each variable are reported in Table 2, as well as the effects of symbolic racial attitudes on the probability of voting for Mike Foster, controlling for partisanship, ideology, and education.

Table 2 demonstrates how the effect of symbolic racism on vote choice is conditioned by partisanship, ideology, and education. It shows how symbolic racism cuts across both partisanship and ideology, and how, in the 1995 gubernatorial election, an appeal based on symbolic racial issues could be made by Foster to Democrats, Independents, Liberals, and Moderates, without alienating racially tolerant conservatives or Republicans. For example, Democrats who had above average symbolic race scores were thirty-six points more likely to support Foster than Democrats with below average scores, and Independents with above average scores were thirty points more likely to be supportive of Foster than Independents with below average scores. A similar pattern was found with ideology. Liberals with above average symbolic racism scores were thirty-seven points more likely to vote for Foster than Liberals with below average scores, while Moderates with above average scores were thirty-one points more likely to vote for Foster than Moderates with below average scores.

TABLE 2

The Effects of Symbolic Racial Attitudes on Vote Choice in the 1995 Gubernatorial Election (whites only)

	Symbolic Racism				
	<i>Low</i>	<i>Below Average</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Above Average</i>	<i>High</i>
Partisanship					
Democratic	.29	.49	.71	.85	.93
Independent	.39	.60	.79	.90	.95
Republican	.49	.69	.85	.93	.97
Ideology					
Liberal	.24	.43	.63	.80	.91
Moderate	.36	.57	.76	.88	.94
Conservative	.50	.70	.85	.93	.97
Education					
Below high school	.49	.69	.84	.93	.97
High school	.43	.64	.80	.91	.96
Some college	.37	.58	.76	.88	.95
College graduate	.31	.52	.71	.85	.93

NOTES: The independent variables are those which reached statistical significance. Cell entries are predicted probabilities of a vote for Mike Foster, calculated from the logistic regression in Table 1.

Finally, Table 2 demonstrates the conditioning effect of education on symbolic racism and vote choice. Specifically, it demonstrates how candidates who use symbolic racial campaign issues can appeal to less educated white voters. From a strategic perspective this is important for Republican candidates in statewide Louisiana elections, who, given the party's disadvantage in partisanship levels, need the support of white Democrats of lower socioeconomic status, i.e. the "Duke" or "Reagan" Democrats, to win a statewide ma-

jority. Clearly, Table 2 shows that by making symbolic racial issues salient, a Republican candidate can appeal to less educated and lower-income white voters while avoiding the accusation of running a "racist" campaign, which may alienate the more Republican inclined but more racially tolerant, upscale white voters. Only among those whites with at least some college education and low symbolic race scores was the predicted probability of a vote for Foster likely to be low. However, such voters constitute a very small fraction of the white Louisiana electorate. Finally, it should be noted that, for whites with above average and high symbolic racism scores, the conditioning effect of education is less perceptible, with respondents at every level of educational attainment having a very high predicted probability of voting for Foster.

## Conclusions

Our analysis demonstrates the importance of symbolic racism in the 1995 Louisiana gubernatorial runoff election. Yet, this was not an election featuring a prominent candidate with a specific racial conservative appeal, nor one where race was injected in the discussion of political issues. As we argue, no white candidate had to emulate a David Duke, or resort to a "Willie Horton-style" television commercial; the mere presence of a black candidate in the gubernatorial runoff election framed the campaign around race and activated white racial resentment. Thus, at least in Louisiana, the hypothesis of Key (1949) that racial attitudes are the most crucial variable in explaining white political behavior remains. However, the nature of these racial attitudes

almost fifty years after the publication of *Southern Politics* has changed. We argue that in capturing the essence of contemporary racism and the cognitive structure of white racial attitudes, symbolic racism possesses greater validity and is a more powerful explanatory variable than aggregate-level variables, such as black density, which has been employed in several recent studies to identify a relationship between white racism and voting behavior (Giles and Buckner, 1993; Voss, 1996; Orey, 1998).

From the strategic perspective of political parties, for the future of evolving party competition in Louisiana, and throughout the South more generally, our findings are also illuminating. Given the overwhelmingly conservative disposition of white Louisiana voters on racial issues, Republican candidates in Louisiana appear well placed to expand their electoral base by making salient issues with a symbolic racial dimension. The problem for Republicans is how to frame such issues without being accused of running an overtly racist campaign. Mike Foster was able to succeed by making only the most oblique references to race because he faced a black opponent. Had he faced a white Democratic opponent, such as Mary Landrieu, then perhaps Foster's use of racial issues would have been more direct.<sup>‡‡</sup> Regardless

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<sup>‡‡</sup> 4 An election between two white candidates did occur in Louisiana in 1996, in the Senate runoff contest that pitted Mary Landrieu against Republican state representative Louis "Woody" Jenkins. Race did not feature prominently in this election, and if it did at all, it was as a result of Landrieu's problems with black community in Louisiana following her refusal to endorse Fields in the 1995 gubernatorial runoff election. It should also be noted that while Mike Foster's conservatism was directed

of the type of candidates running in future statewide elections in Louisiana—and elsewhere in the South—it would appear that race and racial attitudes will be imperative to the strategic context of campaigns in explaining individual level attitudes and behavior and, ultimately, in deciding electoral outcomes.

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primarily at "racial backlash" whites, Jenkins' conservatism was aimed at evangelicals.



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